

Using Art to Study the Past
Abraham Lincoln & Emancipation Proclamation – 1863

A Lesson Plan from the White House Historical Association

When studying events that occurred before the widespread use of photography, historians have used artwork to supplement resources such as documents, diaries, and artifacts. While an artist's view of an event is less accurate than first-hand written accounts, many paintings and engravings can tell us what events were found important enough to document this way. Artists, after all, were in the business of selling their works, and would often offer popular images that were attractive to buyers.

Using symbols, an artist can tell a story beyond the actual event that a photographer cannot. The engraving used in this lesson, "First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before Lincoln's Cabinet," is derived from one of the best-known historical paintings in American history, along with John Trumbull's paintings of the Battle of Bunker Hill and the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

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